

**The breeding of the Great Spotted Cuckoo
Clamator glandarius L. in Iraq and a note on the Iraq eggs
of the Kashmir Magpie *Pica pica bactriana* Bp.**

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Received 13th March, 1962

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In the *Survey of Iraq Fauna, 1915–1919*¹ and *Jour. Bom. Nat. Hist. Soc.* (2: p. 298), with reference to *Clamator glandarius*, it is recorded “Weigold met with several pairs at Urfa* in April and thought they would certainly nest in the nests of *Corvus cornix*.” Also, “Woosnam obtained one at Bund-i-Kir on the Karun on 6th March and Zarudny includes it as a passage migrant. It breeds in the oak woods of S.W. Persia and it is curious that no one came across it in our area.” During March and in May 1961, Mr. S. Marchant, at Baghdad, collected for me some eggs of the local magpie, *Pica pica bactriana* Bp., which are now in the National Collection at the British Museum (Natural History). Their data are:—23rd March 1961, two infertile eggs taken, 33.2 x 22.4 and 33.0 x 22.4 mm., from a set of seven eggs, five of which hatched 21st–23rd March. The first egg was laid on 25th February. The eggs are smooth with slight gloss, pale greenish-blue, streakily marked all over, fairly thickly, with light and pale dull brown on underlying pale grey and pale ash; there are concentrations of both markings at the large end. The nest was at the top of a Euphrates poplar in a thicket and about 300 cm. above the ground. Another nest was found with two eggs on 28th March, and when examined on 19th May was deserted and contained six eggs. Five (one of which was broken) were infertile and in the sixth there was a well developed embryo. They were smooth, with some gloss; pale greenish-blue, and more discretely marked than the previously described two; markings more rounded and not so streaky; brown and dull brown on underlying pale grey and ash; there is a concentration of markings in each egg at the top of the large end. The measurements of these six eggs vary from 29.1–31.8 x 21.6–22.4 mm., and average 31.6 x 22.25 mm. From their small size one would expect *bactriana* to be a small race of *Pica pica*, which, however, it is not, as *bactriana* is considerably larger; yet the range of 100 eggs of typical *Pica pica*, according to *The Handbook of British Birds, 1938*, is 27.7–39.4 x 22.8–28 mm., and the average 34.1 x 24.2 mm. But Stuart-Baker (4: p. 38) gives 35.7 x 24.4 as the average measurements of *P. p. bactriana* eggs in India. If Marchant’s markedly small six eggs are a fair sample of the eggs of the Iraq Magpie, it will be worth re-examining the three skins—identified as *P. p. bactriana*—now with the Bombay Natural History Society, which were collected by members of the Mesopotamia Expeditionary Force. In 1918, when I was on the Tigris, the magpie was not found downstream of Baghdad; on the Euphrates, it did not occur below Hilla. In 1917, I found it nesting at Feluja (on the Euphrates, some 40 miles north-west of Baghdad) on 19th March, and on 28th April young in the nest were found there. At Museyib, on the Euphrates, just above the Hindia Barrage, in the same year, I noted that the magpie was one of the

* Urfa is in eastern Turkey and east of the Euphrates.

commonest garden birds and many juveniles were seen in June. It would seem, therefore, that March is the month during which most magpie eggs are laid. I asked Marchant whether there was a possibility of the Great Spotted Cuckoo victimizing the magpie at Baghdad. He replied *in litt.* "I should doubt whether *Clamator glandarius* nests this far south in Iraq. This cuckoo is pretty scarce on passage and though I saw one rather late this year (1961), about the end of March, I have never had any idea that they stay to nest in central Iraq. Yet it is remarkable that the local magpies are thrown into a frenzy by their mere presence." It seemed to me that if the appearance of a Great Spotted Cuckoo, at a time when the magpies are nesting, could have such a disturbing effect on them, then there is the likelihood that sometimes a cuckoo breeds at Baghdad. I urged Marchant to make further enquiries, with the result *in litt.* (22nd February 1962) "I was astonished to see a *Clamator glandarius* at Kirkuk (c. 150 miles north-east of Baghdad) on 10th February, a remarkably early date I believe." Further, a reliable observer at Kirkuk informed him that during the summer in 1961 he had seen magpies feeding *Clamator glandarius*. Moore and Boswell (³: pp. 121-122) record a magpie's nest at Mosul (on the Tigris, some 230 miles north of Baghdad), on 19th April 1945 which contained *two* sorts of eggs, and a pair of Great Spotted Cuckoos were seen near by. On 8th April 1945, also at Mosul, a magpie was seen being chased by a Great Spotted Cuckoo. Marchant writes "it is a fair guess that *C. glandarius* breeds in Iraq from Kirkuk northwards, but in my own experience (he has for several years been based on Baghdad) would say that they do not do so as far south as Baghdad. Yet, there is evidence that *Pica* has increased enormously in the last 15 years in central Iraq and perhaps *Clamator* will be following them. *Pica* is already (22nd February) making new nests, but I have seen no *Clamator* at Baghdad." Writing further on 28th March 1962, Marchant is dubious that he can have overlooked *C. glandarius* at Baghdad, for while at Kirkuk on 17th-19th March he came across at least two pairs of this cuckoo which were "very noisy and entirely conspicuous." None has been observed (or heard) at Baghdad during the 1962 spring, although some 15 *Pica* nests in all stages from ready-for-eggs to young two weeks old have been located. Presumably the remarkable increase in magpies in central Iraq and their ever-growing southerly thrust is due to more favourable environmental conditions resulting from the widespread extension of cultivation. Chapman and McGeoch's sight record (⁵: p. 586) of a single bird at Habbaniya (43° 34' E.: 33° 22' N.; north-west of Baghdad, and west of the Euphrates) on 28th June 1953 is significant. I am greatly indebted to Mr. S. Marchant for the trouble he has taken to obtain this interesting information, as well as the *Pica* eggs. In my own experience in East Africa I have noticed that breeding cuckoos do not necessarily advertise their presence, they can be both secretive and silent; and Mr. Myles North, (*in litt.*) who found *C. glandarius* eggs in Somalia (in the nests of *Corvus corax edithae* Phill.) wrote "Nor did I ever see *glandarius* here."

Since the above notes were written a further sixteen *Pica pica* eggs have been received from Marchant, which were collected in 1962. In size they range from 29.1-36.5 x 21.2-25.0 mm. and average 33.45 x 23.1 mm. The total of twenty-two eggs which have now been received average approximately 33.0 x 22.9 mm., markedly larger than the previously discussed six

which average 31.6 x 22.25 mm., though they still average smaller than those of typical *Pica pica* and are much smaller than the average of *P. p. bactriana* eggs taken in India.

These sixteen eggs are from six nests (2/7, 3/6, 1/5) which contained a total of thirty-seven eggs. All the eggs taken were either infertile or deserted; and first eggs were laid respectively on 15th, 16th, 18th, 19th, 20th and 24th March. A few are unusually elongate and narrow, for instance 36.3 x 22.3 mm. In coloration and markings the majority are typical *Pica pica* eggs and, as is often the case in corvine eggs, one has a concentration of markings at the narrow end. Several eggs are so thickly marked as to appear almost brownish. Three eggs (infertile) *ex c/6* are somewhat unusual and of a pale blue ground, curiously marked with large pale brown spots or blotches, some elongate, on similar and even larger pale grey markings all over. Major W. M. Congreve who has examined these three eggs comments "not a very common type of marking".

One *c/6*, all infertile, presents a problem. Four eggs are typically marked; a fifth is more handsome with rather discrete and not over numerous bright brown markings on underlying pale grey, mainly at larger end and with a dark cap. The sixth egg is rather stumpy and squat and measures 29.1 x 21.8mm.—but in Marchant's previous sending, one typically marked egg measures 29.1 x 21.6 mm.—and is appreciably the smallest of the sixteen. Its pale brownish coloration all over, streakily marked with pale brown on light violet-grey, with a fairly thick brownish cap on underlying dense violet-grey, is unlike any of the others. Although I have never seen an egg of *Clamator glandarius* quite like this, the disparity in its size and colour makes it strangely out of place in this set, but Congreve agrees that it cannot be attributed to the Great Spotted Cuckoo. Marchant (*in litt.*) also informs me that in 1962, at Kirkuk, a nest of *Pica pica* which held five eggs on 24th March, finally produced at least two young *Clamator glandarius* "which were observed daily by Mr. and Mrs. Kitchen".

One of these young cuckoos, almost ready to fly and which was handled, was noted already to have full adult plumage.

References:

- ¹ Survey of Iraq Fauna made by members of the Mesopotamia Expeditionary Force, 1915-1919.
- ² Ticehurst, C. B. 'The Birds of Mesopotamia.' *Jour. Bom. Nat. His. Soc.*, XXVIII (2), 1922.
- ³ Moore, H. J. and Boswell, C. Field Observations on the Birds of Iraq. II. Publication No. 10 Iraq Natural History Museum, 1956.
- ⁴ Stuart-Baker, E. C. *Fauna of British India, Birds*. 1. July, 1922.
- ⁵ Chapman, E. A. and McGeoch, J. A. 'Recent Field Observations from Iraq.' *Ibis* 98, 1956.